

Attitudes of Portuguese Shepherds Towards Livestock Guarding Dogs

Carla Cruz¹ & Francisco Petrucci-Fonseca

Grupo Lobo, Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade de Lisboa, Bloco C2, 3º Piso, Campo Grande, 1749-016 Lisboa, Portugal.

¹ Current address: Quinta do Álamo, Apartado 29, 6234-907 Alpedrinha, Portugal.

Abstract

Livestock guarding dogs (LGDs) are a traditional European method for flock protection. Disappearance of large carnivores, along with lack of interest of rural populations for livestock husbandry in extensive systems, has led to the decline of these dogs and loss of knowledge on their correct education. However, many endangered carnivore species are currently expanding their distribution ranges. This leads to an increase of predation on flocks, thus an increase of economic damage on rural populations and therefore higher animosity towards predators. Since the 1990s, several projects have been established throughout Europe aiming to reduce human-carnivore conflicts through the use of livestock guarding dogs, a non-lethal means to protect flocks from carnivores. In order for LGDs to be effective, it is necessary not only an adequate genetic component (i.e. adequate breed type), and proper husbandry and upbringing conditions but also that shepherds aid in their education through correct behaviour towards the dogs. Recognition of adequate human actions and timely correction of improper attitudes are extremely important in the correct development of LGDs, as what these animals learn in their first few months will decisively influence their behaviour with the flock. In this presentation we show attitudes Portuguese shepherds have with the dogs used to guard their flocks and discuss the implications in the effectiveness of livestock protection. During monitorization sessions for behavioural development of LGD puppies placed in several flocks, we qualitatively assessed the different attitudes displayed by shepherds towards the dogs, in order to assess which are adequate and which are improper for their correct development. "Desirable" attitudes concern acts leading to increase the LGD bond with the flock, reducing its interaction with other animals and people, whereas "undesirable" attitudes lead to a strengthening of social bonds with people, leading to the dog not paying attention to livestock.

Poster

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